

Q: Good morning. Today is September 10th, 2019. My name is Helene Tischler. I'm here at the Newton Free Library with Julie Plaut Mahoney. Together we are participating in Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. Thank you for doing this.

A: Thank you.

Q: So we're going to start with your connections to Newton, how long you've lived here...pretty open-ended.

A: Okay. I moved to Newton as a five-year-old in 1973 with my parents and my younger brother. I had been born in Bangkok, because my father was in the service during the Vietnam war, and then after five years in Buffalo, he got a job at his alma mater, Tufts Medical School. So we all packed up and eased on down the road, the Mass Pike, to Boston, where we knew no one.

Q: Oh. Okay.

A: That was 1973.

Q: So what brought them to Newton, specifically?

A: That's a great question. I have no idea, except probably what brings everyone else to Newton, which is a reputation for good schools and a good place to raise a family. My parents had lived in Boston on Charles Street as newlyweds, so they knew Newton--they knew of it.

Q: Right. Right.

A: I don't know--I frankly think it was a fight--not a fight, that's the wrong word--a disagreement between my parents between Newton and Brookline. Brookline was more like Brooklyn, which was familiar to my mother.

Q: Yes.

A: But Newton had the lure of a real suburb. So my guess is there was some conversations there, but Newton won.

Q: Okay. And do you remember actually moving here when you were five?

A: Yes. Yes I do.

Q: What part of Newton did you live in?

A: Newton Centre, 84 Hancock Avenue. I remember the whole thing. It was June, and I remember also--my mother having grown up in Brooklyn, and they didn't have the money for summer camp, and didn't understand summer camp, frankly. Why would you go to summer camp when there were all these kids running around outside? But in Newton in 1973, you sent your kids to summer camp. And my mother I think looked outside and saw no children, and quiet streets, and someone said, "You gotta send her to camp, because there's no one hanging around." So my mother sent me to camp at five.

Q: To a sleepaway camp?

A: No no no. A day camp.

Q: A day camp, right.

A: But you know here she was, she had moved to the suburbs to raise her family and she looked outside and there were no children.

Q: There were no children in the summer.

A: Right.

Q: And were there summer programs from the school system when you moved here?

A: No, I don't think a lot of those--frankly, she started most of those.

Q: Oh, interesting. Because one of my sons did that.

A: Yeah. And I think, and you'll appreciate this...I mean, she said almost till the day she died, I mean these are her words--she was very, very motivated in her career by that shock of feeling isolated and lonely in the suburbs when she was used to a very vibrant street life. And I think that not only motivated her to build these programs which brought people together, but also her number one go-to family or person was someone who moved here knowing no one, usually for someone's job, and helping them integrate into the community. I mean that was her--if she met someone like that at Whole Foods, you know they left with flyers. And that was her whole thing, based on the loneliness of her own experience.

Q: That's really amazing. So that's how she got involved. And then where did you initially go to school in Newton?

A: I went to Mason-Rice.

Q: Oh, you did!

A: And then it was time for middle school and Weeks was closing, which was our neighborhood school. And we were being bused to Day, which from Newton Centre, Auburndale felt really far--

Q: Absolutely.

A: --before Instagram and Snapchat and kids knowing each other.

Q: And cell phones.

A: And cell phones! My mother was nervous about middle school. She sent me to Beaver Country Day School for a year, and again for years told the story of the re-enrollment contract coming and me crying on the floor of her room begging to go back to public school, so I went back to public school.

Q: Really?

A: And that was it.

Q: And what were your experiences like? Do you remember Mason-Rice?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: And did you go to Day, then, for middle school?

A: I went to Day for 8th and 9th, and then North when it was 10th, 11th, 12th.

Q: Right. Right. And so what were the schools like? What did you notice as you went on?

A: You know, I do think technology--at least for middle school when you're first leaving your neighborhood school to then go to outside of your neighborhood--I do think it is different now having raised two kids of my own. Kids go to middle school and they know each other from--

Q: Elementary.

A: Well, from elementary but also online from Snapchat or whatever.

Q: Right.

A: In those days, when you went from Mason-Rice to Day, I mean you might as well have been going to Worcester. I mean--

Q: You had no connection with them.

A: We had no connection. So I think if you talk to my Mason-Rice friends, many of whom I'm still in touch with and are just my dear friends, they all say the same thing. It was like we got sent away.

Q: That's amazing.

A: It was a feeling we all carry with us. We still talk about it.

Q: Right. Right. And what was the experience in school for your children?

A: That's an interesting question too.

Q: You know, how had it changed? Did they go to similar--Do you live in the same area?

A: I live on the other side of the zip code. I lived in the same zip code as my mother. She lived on the far west side and I lived on the far east side, but it was the same zip code. My son went through the Newton public schools--Ward, Bigelow, North. And my daughter was diagnosed with dyslexia as a child, and you know to be frank, the Newton public schools--it was not working. So as much as it was not our plan when we bought a house in Newton, we sent her to private school.

Q: Right. Right.

A: And I think that was the best choice for her.

Q: Absolutely. You have to make those choices.

A: You do, but you know the--

Q: It's hard when you're--

A: The culture of the Newton public schools is so strong and intense and it's such a draw to this area, that then to be mindfully not going that route was about staying very focused on the child and not on the drumbeat of--I mean, saying no to one of the big reasons that you moved here.

Q: Right. Absolutely.

A: That was hard.

Q: Yeah. I can imagine. So what connections did you maintain over time with Mason-Rice and with North? Did you go away to college?

A: I did. I went to UMass Amherst, which I tell my kids was my safety school, which those were back in the days when UMass was a safety school. It is no longer, but it was then. That's where you went when you didn't get in to where you really wanted to go, which I did not. And it was great. I was on the honor roll from week one, and I absolutely loved it. And I came back four years later to do my laundry, and met my husband and got my first job, and we lived with my mother for five years.

Q: Oh. Okay. I wondered what brought you back to Newton. Was your husband from this area?

A: My husband grew up in Lexington. But really I just went home to do my laundry and kind of get my act together after college, and--

Q: Stayed.

A: Stayed.

Q: That's great. Well what are some of the landmarks or special events--some positive things you remember? I'm sure there are tons.

A: There are tons.

Q: What stands out over the years? I know your family was very involved in the life of Newton.

A: For sure. You know we had no extended family around, and it was lonely.

Q: Yeah.

A: And there was no uncle or grandmother to leave my brother and I with while my mom was working. And she schlepped us along. And I think learning literally from being taken around with her really influenced strongly who I am now and what I do and choices I made about my own kids. In terms of places and events, you know the Newton Centre playground, not to sound like an old timer, but you know really before the internet, you just went down to the Newton Centre playground. And you kissed boys and I don't know what--you did things that made you grow up.

My Mason-Rice friends have a very special place in my heart. I just had lunch with one yesterday.

Q: That's great.

A: You know, it's really--if someone needed a blood transfusion I would be there. I just really feel a very soulful connection to them.

Q: That's amazing.

A: Yeah.

Q: And with you mother starting so many of the events in Newton, did you participate in a lot of them?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: What did you--yeah, go ahead.

A: I mean, yeah, she needed help, and we handed out brochures and you know, got water for people and you know... We once had a whole group of clowns sleeping on our third floor, because--

Q: That's amazing!

A: Yeah. She didn't realize that their gig came with lodging. So we had these clowns sleeping on the third floor. It just goes on and on and on. Getting back to the Newton Centre playground, I have to say, the Fourth of July on the Newton Centre playground that she created really became important to me, important to the community, important to my kids, important to my friends' kids. We all still go on the Fourth of July.

Q: That's great.

A: That's something that's really endured. And also the Newton Centre concerts on Sunday nights. And she used to have--

Q: Right. So she started that.

A: --that she started. And she had this really wonderful saying, especially when my kids were little, remembering when my brother and I were little. You know when you're home with your kids and everyone's sort of gotta get out, so you go out for a certain amount of time and you do something. And then she would say, "Okay, it's safe to go home. Everyone's tired, we've had a stimulating day, it's safe to go home." And what she used to say about the Newton Centre concerts--because if you didn't own a summer house and you weren't driving back from somewhere, Sundays in the summer between four and seven were kind of a melancholy time. And she really felt like, "Okay, so every Sunday we're all gonna just pack up our dinners and go

to Newton Centre and be together." And then you buy the kids an ice cream and by the time you go home, it's safe to go home. And that--

Q: That's interesting, yeah.

A: That was her whole thing. You gotta stay out long enough that then it's safe to go home. And so that's kind of what Sunday nights became.

Q: Right. Right. And what community people did you end up meeting through all of these events?

A: Oh, everyone.

Q: Really? Okay.

A: All the mayors.

Q: Do you remember Teddy Mann?

A: Of course, of course. He was the one that brought her in, saw her spark. I mean, my mother served five mayors. She was very, very mindful of the fact that it was her honor to serve them and their administration. She was a city employee, she was paid by tax dollars. It was a--I mean, I don't mean this to sound obsequious, but it was sort of a service mentality. Like, she was a civil servant.

Q: Right.

A: And people would say, you know, "What do you think about this mayor?" or "What do you think about...?" And she never weighed in on any of it. She said, "I am an employee of this city, and I serve these people." She wouldn't--she never got involved in political campaigns, she wouldn't put a sign on her lawn. I don't put signs on my lawn.

Q: Okay. Interesting. You maintain that.

A: Just Switzerland.

Q: Right. It was very ethical.

A: It was very ethical. She was very ethical. She always used to say, "Always live your life so you're never afraid to answer the phone." And to this day I just live by it.

Q: That's amazing. You'll have to write some of these down. I know we're recording it, but--

A: She really was a wise...she was wise.

Q: That's incredible. So have you remained active in some of these organizations? Have you been involved with others in Newton?

A: Yeah. You know, my mother always leaned more towards the arts, and I always leaned more towards the human services. And we respected that about each other. We were both very active, but we had different areas.

Q: Right, right.

A: I, through my work--it's sort of a long story, I don't know how much you want to hear--but the latest thing I'm doing is with four other women, we're running--we just got our 501(c)(3) status last week--a nonprofit called Welcome Home, where we take home goods--born of my days in working with older adults who would pass away, a lot of home goods in their houses. Their kids take what they want, which really isn't that much, leaves a whole house. We matched those older adults with women moving out of Second Step. So we came up with a program where we would take all the dishes and bedding and pillows and all these things that weren't needed anymore and give it to people who could use it. So from that, we are now starting our own nonprofit.

Q: That's amazing.

A: So yeah. That spirit does come from my mom. Very hands-on, very community-based. No nonsense, get it done kind of mentality.

Q: So what was your training?

A: I have a PhD in sociology, and I thought--my father was an academic, and I thought that that's what I wanted. And as I made my way through my graduate program, I was one of those sort of happy, well-funded graduate students that I really liked what I was doing.

Q: Very lucky.

A: I was very lucky. But I really--there was a lot about academia that I found that I didn't want for myself. And I defended my dissertation pregnant with my second child, and then 9/11 happened a month before she was born, and I said, "You know what? I don't have to be a professor of sociology if I don't want to." And I remember I told my adviser and he said, "I just want you to do meaningful work in the world. It's okay." Which is a big deal, right? Because

when you tell your dissertation adviser you're not gonna be an academic, you just cut the life-line.

Q: Absolutely. Sure.

A: But I'm very happy with the road that I've chosen. It's been right for me.

Q: Yes. No, it sounds amazing. The work you're doing is so important. What were some of the challenges growing up as sort of a famous person, or just being in Newton? Anything you can recall.

A: I think the thing that sticks with me, and I try to be mindful of it with my own kids, is there was a period that I refused to go to Newton Centre with my mother because you couldn't get three feet, and everyone wanted to talk to her, which was wonderful. And she loved it. But first of all I couldn't get to where I was trying to go, and secondly--she's your mother, and you know a child runs out of patience for their parent as a public person. So I went through a phase, and it was okay, but I just stopped being in public with her for a while. Then I got back on my feet and then I went through another phase where I just--we saw each other at home. That worked better for me. Then I grew up, and it was all okay.

But I mean, not to overstate it, but it does give me a lot of empathy for the children of truly famous people. I mean, my mother was only famous locally. But what's it like to be--

Q: Yeah, in the public eye.

A: --Barbara Streisand's daughter, or I don't know. Someone really famous. You can see how those people can get very quiet.

Q: Right. That's interesting.

A: And just want stillness and privacy. I crave that more than my mother ever did anyway, but I have empathy for truly famous people's children.

Q: Yes. You lived it.

A: I lived it super junior version.

Q: Well, here it's a reality. If you walk down the street and everyone's stopping you...

A: Yeah. Yeah. No, she loved it. I just realized I didn't always have to be there.

Q: Right. What changes have you noticed in Newton since being here--since you were five? In the city or in your neighborhood, in the schools, anything that you...

A: Yeah. I mean, on a purely superficial level, the traffic. And I wonder about the traffic in the context of the overall quality of life here. That's something that I'm very aware of.

This is something that didn't affect me directly, but I had a teacher--one thing, by the time--I guess, to answer your question, so I graduated from Newton North in 1986, and my son just graduated a year and a half ago. And I had a teacher, Ty Vignone, at Day who then went to North, who made a huge impression on me, because he was the one who taught me the difference between plot and theme in a book. Like, in a child's mind, plot is what happened, you know theme is why it happened, and more context. He just blew my head open. And I was always grateful to him.

And it's interesting--when I was a child, we were on vacation on the Cape and we went to Provincetown, and he what do you know owned a toy store. That's what he did in the summers. Turns out he was gay, and it was a time when it was probably pretty hard for gay kids at Newton North, and I think he--I always think about how he blew my mind, that was my experience. But I think he really changed the culture for kids, for a lot of kids, I think especially a lot of gay kids at Newton North.

Q: At Newton North. Was he in the open at that point?

A: He was not when--in the '80s.

Q: Yeah. I think it was not a popular thing.

A: He was not. But by the time my son got there, I think he had donated money--I don't know this for sure, I probably shouldn't say it on film...

Q: That's okay.

A: But I think he had donated a certain amount of money for an organization for gay--for kids on the LGBTQ spectrum, and again it wasn't my story or the story of my kids, but it was something then going back to the school a generation later, I really saw the impact that he made. And I kinda carry that with me, that--and the world changed with him.

Q: Yes. Absolutely.

A: But he did a lot. He deserves a lot of credit. When he died, that Newton North auditorium was filled.

Q: Amazing.

A: It was beautiful.

Q: He made a real impact.

A: He made a real impact.

Q: And within your class, was there a lot of diversity? Do you remember?

A: I remember the racial and ethnic diversity was really between the kids who grew up living in Newton and METCO.

Q: Right.

A: It felt like a very--really divided. Yes, there were kids of all colors, it's just that the white kids came from Newton and the black kids were METCO students. When I go there now--I mean, I've done a lot of work at North through my work and with my son there--I mean, it's just...everybody's all different colors. That seems better. And I think the faculty is more diverse.

Q: Yes. I think that probably is the difference. And were the classes very stratified? You know, you notice more white kids in the honors and the...Was that the case then, or--?

A: It's interesting that you mention that, because--I can't speak about it from a racial standpoint, but the stratification of the classes was something that I had a hard time with when I was there and my--I will protect my children's privacy, but did not serve them well, and was pretty much the reason why we sent our daughter elsewhere. I think I'll stop at that.

Q: That's okay.

A: But that's something that could use some work.

Q: Okay. Interesting. My son went to Newton North and I'm just wondering if they still had, you know, sort of that stratification in the classes.

A: Well yeah, because the classes that you're in, that's your world. And you know...not everyone's a high school superstar.

Q: Right. And you didn't feel it as much then, for yourself.

A: Well, I won't speak for my children, but I'll speak for myself.

Q: No, for yourself.

A: I spent half the day in the upper-level classes, in the classes that I was strong, and half the day in lower-level classes. And yeah, it had an effect on me. It did. And so when my own kids got to that point, I knew it when I saw it.

Q: Right.

A: That's a whole other conversation. But getting back to the other thing about the Newton public schools, people move here for the schools, but then I think the reality is you have the children you have, and you have to parent them. And just because you came largely for the schools doesn't mean you have to send them to those schools all the way through.

Q: Right. You're still supporting them through your taxes.

A: Lord knows!

Q: So that's interesting. So some positive memories, some...

A: Some not so much.

Q: A little shaky.

A: I'll tell you some of my friends from growing up here, when we get together--you know how groups of people retell the same stories all the time? That's one of the stories they tell, about the stratification in the high school. And I think that's alive and well.

Q: Yeah. Okay. Interesting. So your son graduated.

A: My son graduated. He's in college now. My daughter is finishing at a private school, and I think we made good choices for them, or helped them make good choices. At a certain point you can't tell your kid where they're going--I mean, at a certain point they have a vote.

Q: Right. Absolutely. And how do they feel about growing up in Newton and....Do you get a sense of--did they have a similar feeling as you did, or--?

A: I think they did. They had a very public grandma. She was a very loving grandma to them, and extremely hands-on. So they got used to sort of seeing her in front of a microphone in front of 500 people, but then she was also in our kitchen drinking coffee. So they had a superlative grandmother experience. I think my daughter, who didn't go through the Newton public schools and so has known kids from other towns, has a sensitivity around some of the privilege that her friends have had, and I mean to a certain extent what she's had living here. So she in some ways brings more sophistication at a younger age, because she's been exposed to so many more towns

and ways of living through these friends who are not here. My son had a little more insular mentality. But that was his experience.

Q: But positive, generally.

A: Oh yeah.

Q: And active in any community organizations?

A: My kids?

Q: Yeah. And your family and now.

A: Yeah. I mean...that's a whole other story. My husband converted to Judaism, and fell in love with it hook, line, and sinker, and got very involved in Jewish institutional life, in a way that we had not been growing up. He grew up in a very strict Catholic family, where you went every Sunday. He said he remembers being in church with a fever, sweating. You had to go! You just had to go. And he brought this almost like Catholic "Just do it--go" mentality to our Jewish life, which I hadn't grown up with that. You know what, we went every Friday night for a long time, and I make Shabbat dinner every Friday night. He brought a real rigor to our religious practice, that hadn't been there.

Q: So which synagogue or temple--

A: Temple Emanuel. And interesting too--we live where we live, and in his mind, from the Catholic church model, you go to your neighborhood parish. You don't look for a place where you feel comfortable, you just go.

Q: You don't shop around.

A: You don't shop around. You just go. So we moved there, and there's a synagogue, and I said, "Oh no, no, that's not for us. That's too conservative. I'm not keeping kosher. Not happening." And he was like, "Yeah. It's right there. Happening." And it's happening! And that was 20 years ago, and we have wonderful friends and community, and he was right. I'll say it on the record, he was right and I was wrong.

Q: He'll have to watch this tape.

A: Yeah, he'll have to listen to this. No, but he was right and I was wrong, and he took my whole family along with him--my parents, my brother. We're all--my father belongs now.

Q: Wow. Great. So it evolved.

A: It evolved. He was right.

Q: That's great.

A: He was right.

Q: That's great. It sounds like everything very positive. Was there anything sort of on the negative side, or things you've noticed you wish would change, besides the traffic in Newton?

A: Yeah. What do I wish would change? I think what I wish would change is on the national level. And you probably don't want to hear about that in the context of this interview, but I'm obviously very upset about it, like many people are. Except for the traffic in Newton, I like a lot

about what goes on in Newton. My feelings of discomfort and nervousness come from the national level.

Q: Right, right. Not local.

A: Not local. I will say though, and maybe this makes me sound stodgy and I don't mean it to, but I'm very ambivalent about these--I call them pot shops. My kids say they're not pot shops, they're marijuana dispensaries. I'm ambivalent about it. I worked in hospice care, and I know how marijuana can be used to alleviate suffering at the end of life. It's been used that way for a very long time. I'm obviously in favor of that.

I was in the Pacific Northwest a couple times in the last few years, where marijuana has been legal for longer, and I've seen what the streets look like, and I don't think it's served them well. So I'm very--

Q: Yeah. It may be a change that we're going to see.

A: I have a lot of complicated feelings about it. And so to see--when I see these shops open in empty storefronts, I get upset about it. I guess I just said that on the record.

Q: Yes. No, it's a reality.

A: I'm upset about it.

Q: Anything else in terms of changes you've seen?

A: Yeah. I mean this is another one you hear people say, but because I've lived in Newton Centre for oh-so-long at this point--and I know I'm my mother's daughter. I really do love anything that

contributes to a vibrant neighborhood city-center life. So you know, like Galit's in Newton Centre now, the Israeli coffee shop.

Q: Yes. On Union Street.

A: It's on--no, it's on Beacon.

Q: Oh, it's on Beacon. Okay.

A: Or you know, anything where people are--my mother always felt that there's sort of an endless capacity to sit and drink coffee and talk. Like, we're not gonna have too many of those spaces. So you know I was just driving through Newtonville coming here when I grabbed this coffee. There were people in George Howell sitting and talking and drinking coffee.

Q: And Starbucks.

A: And Starbucks and the bread place across the street, which is I think a treasure now. But anywhere people can sit and talk and drink coffee is a good thing. So I think--you've heard it many times before, but I see another bank and I get a little disheartened.

Q: Yes. It's banks and cafes now.

A: Yeah. That's hard for me to see.

Q: Yeah. That's a change.

A: It is a change. I'm sure I don't understand the financials of all that, and maybe if I did I would think differently, but...I'm just glad to see people talking.

Q: Right.

A: Sitting and talking.

Q: And bringing them together.

A: Yeah. Yeah.

Q: That's great. Anything you'd want to tell people looking back at this, since we're recording you for posterity?

A: Yes. Gosh.

Q: Newton--living here, raising children, being involved in the community--as opposed to other places you've seen, or just in general.

A: Yeah. I guess--and I think about when I was contacted about this interview. You know my mother always used to say to be a yes person. When someone asks you to do something--within reason--say yes! Just say yes. You don't know where it's gonna lead. I met this lovely person, we met...Just say yes. It's an hour. And I think in keeping with that, you know when people would say to her they've lived here for many years, they don't feel connected to the community, and my mother would say, "Well, what do you do?" They don't do anything. So volunteer! She got her job volunteering for the bicentennial. She volunteered for the bicentennial celebration in Newton in 1975. It led to her first job with the city, and then this idea led to that idea until Mayor Mann gave her a full-time job. But it was through a volunteer piece when she had two little kids. So--

Q: Just stepping up.

A: The opportunities are all here, but you have to meet them halfway and be a yes person.

Q: Right.

A: And then you'll feel connected.

Q: Right. And Newton is a good place to do that.

A: Newton is a great place to do it.

Q: That's great. So I think we're--our time is almost up.

A: Okay.

Q: Thank you so much for taking the time to do this with us. We're really happy to have you included in the Newton Talks Oral History Project, and nice of you to say yes and join us.

A: Thank you very much. My mother would be glad we're here.

Q: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW